

Can Prayer Accomplish
Anything Apart from
the Man Who Prays?

EDWARD I. BOSWORTH

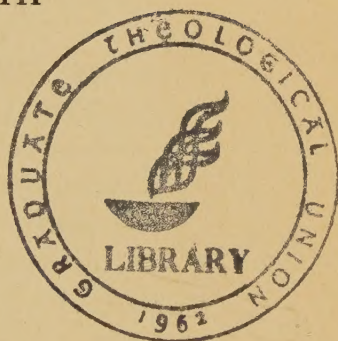
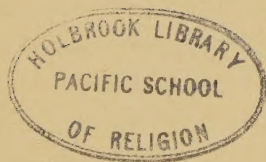
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BY
EDWARD I. BOSWORTH



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CAN PRAYER ACCOMPLISH ANYTHING APART FROM THE MAN WHO PRAYS?

When men find themselves facing disaster or danger they are instinctively moved to pray. Thoughtful men necessarily inquire whether they ought to yield to this instinct, or, instead, to repress it as the incidental survival of a primitive fear characteristic of a lower stage of development. The present great world pain is moving men everywhere to instinctive prayer and therefore to thoughtful questioning regarding the rationality of prayer.

From the Christian standpoint the instinct to pray is a central permanent function of human life the exercise of which leads to a higher stage of human development. The present war may teach the whole race certain important lessons regarding the causes of war and the necessity of their removal, but if it is to be followed by any great and permanent improvement in the race it must introduce men into a better understanding of the theory and practice of prayer. Christian men and women must let the present crisis drive them to prayer—to prayer of a superior quality, expressing a

new fineness of spirit and springing out of a growing appreciation of the rationality and centrality of prayer in its relation to the whole of life.

The most frequent and perhaps the most vital inquiry regarding prayer is expressed in the question: Can prayer accomplish anything apart from the man who prays?

Does prayer consist in anything more than a devout soliloquy? Is it anything more than a kind of spiritual exercise, healthful for the one who practices it, but without direct effect upon any other person, God or man?

The answer to these questions depends upon what we mean by God and what we mean by prayer. There are two propositions regarding the nature of God and the nature of prayer which, if valid, give to prayer more than a merely subjective value. The first is this: *There is all about us a friendly vital energy called the Living God steadily working upon human life to make friendship, brotherhood, universal and secure throughout the human race.* The second is this: *Prayer is a process by which a friendly man gets something from the Friendly God for the common good or to share*

with a fellow man in need. This process binds men together in fast friendship, brings them together into conscious friendship with the Living God, and so contributes vitally to making friendship universal and secure throughout the human race.

These two propositions furnish the foundation for the nearest approach to a philosophy of prayer to be found anywhere in the teaching of Jesus. In the illustration by which he presents this philosophy a man had an unexpected guest appear at his door at midnight, tired and hungry. The man, who had no food to set before his guest, hurried through the darkness to the house of a well-to-do neighbor, asked from him, and received, what he needed for the purpose. "And it came to pass, as he was praying in a certain place, that when he ceased, one of his disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray. . . . And he said unto them, which of you shall have a friend and shall go unto him at midnight and say to him, Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine is come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him? . . . He will arise and give him as many as

he needeth. And I say unto you, ask and it shall be given you." That is, the man who prays is a friendly man standing between two persons, getting something from one to share with the other. He looks out to the gracious Living God and says: "*Friend*, lend me three loaves; for a *friend* of mine is come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him."

The two propositions stated above constitute a challenge to action, and may be put to the test of experience, even though the following attempt to make them seem antecedently reasonable should not succeed to the reader's satisfaction.

I

There is a friendly Living God whose purpose it is to make friendship universal and secure throughout the human race. The scope of this article does not permit any thorough discussion of this first proposition, although what it means may be made clear in a few words.

We know that we are living in the midst of vast unseen energy. Since beginning to read this article the reader has silently and without jar been carried

some hundreds of miles in the earth's swift, unhurried journey around the sun. Immense vital energy is easily lifting countless tons of matter from below the surface of the earth to leaf and flower in the air above the earth. Through a long evolutionary process vast energy, beginning with low forms of life, brought personal human beings into existence. When once the human race was well established, this energy, in spite of elemental human greed, racial hate, and man's primeval love of war, introduced the life of Jesus Christ into the race. Since Jesus' day, in spite of these same adverse influences, the race has moved on, increasingly influenced by the ideals and power of his life.

More and more it becomes a demand of thought that the unseen energy which finds expression in all the various phenomena that confront the mind of man be recognized as one. The nature of this one energy is to be inferred from the highest phenomenon in which it has expressed itself. This highest phenomenon is human personality, and in the sphere of human personality that which is highest and best is Jesus and the men who adopt his ideals

of life. It might be argued that "bad" men, as well as "good" men of the Jesus type, are the phenomena that must furnish us our clue to the nature of the one force behind all phenomena. But when "bad" men are closely scrutinized they are seen to be acting contrary to the laws of normal growth written in the very constitution of their being. Their very natures show that they were meant to be "good" men, men of the Jesus type. Or it might be argued that the sum total of all phenomena, impersonal as well as personal, ought to give us our idea of the one energy behind all phenomena. But when we look at the sum total of all phenomena we find that these phenomena are not miscellaneous and unrelated, but are all gathered up in an evolutionary process which culminates in man at his highest and best. So we may for this reason, to say nothing of others that might be stated in a discussion of larger scope, assume the existence of one energy behind all phenomena which has most clearly expressed itself in the personality of Jesus Christ, and in the character and institutions of men vitally affected by his ideals.

What would this Living God—this power near enough to us to give us being and keep it going, but distinct enough from us to give us a chance to be ourselves—have the human race to be? There are two sources to which we may look for the answer to this question. One is the trend revealed in the history of human development. The other is the ideal of human life presented in the teaching of Jesus Christ. Both sources yield the same reply, namely, the Living God is working toward the secure establishment of a world civilization, in which every man shall wish for every other man of every nation and social condition such a fair chance at all good things as a man should wish his brother to have. In this civilization all the legitimate activities of human life are to find free productive expression. It is to be a civilization in which all men will together find God in the day's work, and do the day's work happily with him and with each other forevermore under the leadership of Jesus Christ. All of man's physical environment is to be mastered and utilized for the accomplishment of friendly purposes and all the latent powers

of personality are to be developed. Men will work creatively with God and with each other on the unfinished universe. In a sense both high and broad we are to be "workers together with God." In this far-reaching purpose of the Living God friendship will be universal and secure throughout the human race; men will be consciously sons of God, brothers to each other, and all the institutions of human civilization will be in accord with this consciousness.

II

Prayer is the process by which a friendly man gets something from the friendly Living God for the common good or to share with a fellow man in need. This means first of all that Christian prayer is never selfish. It may be for one's self, but it is never an effort to get something for one's self alone. Selfish prayer is pagan prayer, not Christian prayer. Christian prayer is "in the name of Christ," that is, in the spirit for which the name of Christ stands, the spirit of Christ's unselfish love. It is "for Jesus' sake," that is, for the sake of the civilization of brotherly men which Jesus pur-

poses to make secure on the earth. It is such prayer as Jesus himself can share with us—the prayer that rises from the little group of disciples with Jesus in the midst (Matt. 18: 19, 20).

The question naturally arises: Why should it be necessary to appeal to the Gracious God in behalf of a fellow man in need? Does not God see the belated traveler, hurrying on through the darkness tired and hungry, and is not God more truly the man's friend than any fellow man can be? Would the Benevolent God delay relief until some man urged him to bring it?

Certainly he would not always wait for man's prayer. Jesus taught that the ceaseless providence of God sends rain and sunshine on both the just and the unjust. But in the light of God's great purpose to make friendship universal and secure, it is apparent that God would sometimes wait for the intermediary friendly prayer. He will sometimes wait until one man's need has had time to appeal to a fellow man and arouse within him the friendly desire to get something from God with which to meet the need. This procedure binds the two men together in lasting

friendship and brings them together into a sympathetic relation with the Friendly God. The process therefore directly contributes to the development of a sense of brotherhood among men and of sonship to God. It is a vital, elemental way of making friendship with God and men universal and secure throughout the human race, of realizing the fundamental ambition of God for the life of man.

Next comes the question: How does God operate in answering prayer? How does the enfolding, vitalizing energy of the Living God *give* to a man anything to share with a fellow man in need? Of course the answer to this question can be only partial because we have only very incomplete knowledge of the nature of God and man. The physicist, the psychologist, and all other investigators of the nature of being and life have much to learn and to teach regarding the method by which many things that are commonplace in human experience occur.

Two things already stand out with reasonable clearness. God could give something to a man by affecting the man's profoundest feeling in accordance with

psychic law. By "feeling" is meant not mere superficial emotion or fancy, but that deep-seated element in personality which seems to underlie all acts of will, all appreciation of the beautiful, and to furnish the intellect with warm material for thought processes. Success and failure in life seem often to depend on the feeling, on the presence or absence of the feeling, involved in faith, hope, courage, enthusiasm. If, in answer to prayer, something passes from the enfolding energy of God into the feeling of a man, a result of vital importance has been secured. An effect has been produced that can be shared with a fellow man in need. A man comes to you weary with life's journey, in midnight darkness, with a great hunger for things that he lacks. What can you do for him? Turn to the Living God, and say, "Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him." Then there will flow into your soul from God the feeling involved in faith, hope, love, courage, and you will be able to pass these on to your friend in need. Nothing is more satisfying or more

vital in the dark hour than to sit by a friend and to receive from him the fresh hope, courage, and comfort that God gives him to share with a friend in need. The experience binds the two together in the love of God.

In another way something passes from God into the personality of the praying man to be shared by him with his fellow man in need. In accordance with psychic law thought passes from the mind of God to the mind of man. Your friend suddenly appears before you in great perplexity, perhaps in desperate need. He has come to a point in the life journey where it is night and he does not see which way to turn. What can you do to help him? Turn to the Friendly God and ask for some idea, for some suggestion that may be passed on to the advantage of your friend. As you and he counsel together prayerfully you will be bound together in friendship, with each other and with the Living God, and so the great purpose of God for the life of the race will be somewhat advanced.

Suppose that the man in need is far away, so that he cannot sit by the side

of his praying friend. Could he yet receive something from God through his praying friend? Experience seems to indicate that he could. In the sphere of psychic relationship distance seems to be, to some extent at least, a negligible factor. We may yet learn how to explain the philosophy of the fact that,

“Away in foreign lands they wondered how
Their simple word had power;
At home the Christians two or three
Had met to pray an hour.”

It is not necessary to suppose that the answer to prayer must always consist in God's giving something to the one who prays which he may pass on to the person for whom he prays. It would seem that God, in accordance with psychic law, might directly affect the feeling or thought of a man in answer to the prayer of some one who had no direct connection with the man so affected. One might ask for his distant friend something that God would grant by directly affecting the feeling or thought of the man prayed for, or of some third person who would bring the desired aid without

knowing why he felt himself moved to do so. The sensitive network of personal relations furnishes a variety of opportunities for God to answer prayer in accordance with psychic law.

“More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of. Wherefore let
thy voice
Rise like a fountain for me night and day.
For what are men better than sheep or goats
That nourish a blind life within the brain,
If, knowing God, they lift not hands in
prayer
Both for themselves and those who call
them friends?
For so the whole round earth is every way
Bound by gold chains about the feet of
God.”

The rationality of such prayer from the standpoint of world friendship is seen in the fact that the man who prays is, in his praying, brought into active friendly cooperation with God and made to feel a keener sympathy with the friend for whom he prays. The gathering of others also into the friendly process, though they may not dream that

answer to prayer is being wrought out through them, helps to increase the sum total of friendly feeling in the world and so to accomplish the great ambition of the Living God.

Does "natural law," the law of "cause and effect" in the "natural world," prevent answer to prayer? Evidently in the sphere of psychic force, as we have just seen, law does not prevent but instead facilitates the answer to prayer. The "law" of psychic action is such as to make the transfer of feeling and thought from mind to mind possible.

Accepting for a moment the distinction generally made between psychic and physical force, without inquiring into its legitimacy, it is evident that physical forces are so coordinated as to be extremely susceptible to the manipulation of a personal will. The more men know about these forces and the laws of their action, the more they are able to do in answer to each other's requests for help. It would seem theoretically probable, therefore, that the Will of God should be able so to manip-

ulate physical forces as to answer prayer. It is an evident fact of experience, however, that God does not to any considerable extent answer prayer in this sphere. We do not pray for rain in the Sahara, sudden transportation through the air, or direct vision through a solid. Fortunately God has left this field for the glory of human achievement. Men must through invention and discovery learn how to subdue and utilize their physical environment. In so doing they will learn how to use power in a friendly way, which is an essential qualification for the inheritance of larger trusts of power in an immortal career.

Does the theological doctrine called predestination or the philosophical theory called determinism forbid the expectation that God will, in answer to prayer, act as he would not act if there were no prayer?

It is sometimes said that since God must be conceived to have a plan that includes all happenings small as well as great, it follows that the thing prayed for either is or is not in God's plan. If it is in God's plan, it will occur without

prayer for it. If it is not in God's plan, it will not occur no matter how much one may pray for it. It is enough to say here that the objection is not logically sufficient to stop prayer. One who really felt that this objection ought to stop prayer would be logically bound to stop asking anyone for anything. If the objection proves the futility of making requests of God, it proves equally well the futility of all requests made by men of each other. Such a conclusion is of course contrary to daily human experience. If I wish to ask my friend to dine with me this objection would lead me to say to myself: "My friend's dining with me either is or is not a feature of God's unchangeable plan. If his visit to me at this time is a part of God's plan he will appear at my table without having been asked by me. If his visit is not in God's plan, he will not appear no matter how urgently I invite him." What we call "common sense" teaches us that we constantly get by asking. Certain things happen only when and because we ask each other that they may. God has no plan that prevents this. Therefore, so far as this particular objection is

concerned, we see no reason why certain things may not happen when and because we ask God that they may. Prayer is a result of that same "common sense" that we constantly exercise in human personal relationship carried into the sphere of the great personal relationship to God. "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?"

When this objection to prayer is stated in the form of philosophical determinism, it represents all being as necessitated to proceed in a way absolutely determined by its own nature. Therefore appeal to God in prayer, it is said, could not move him; or if it could conceivably move him, he could produce no effect on the fixed order of events. Regarding this form of objection it may be said, as was just said about predestination, that the objection cannot logically stop prayer any more than it stops the appeals we are constantly making to each other. We are certain from constant experience that the highest form of energy visibly known to us, namely human personality, often acts when and because

we ask it to do so. It is not therefore unreasonable to suppose that the unseen energy behind all human personality and manifesting itself in human personality may often do the same.

III

What is the condition of growing success in prayer? Evidently that a man shall be a truly friendly man at both ends of the prayer process. He must be able to look Godward and say with growing genuineness, "Friend," glad to do all the will of the Great Friend, with no controversy over any point of duty. He must be able to look manward on every side and say with growing unselfishness to everyone about him, of every race and class, "Friend." This is why Jesus laid such emphasis on the absolute necessity of forgiveness if one would pray: "When ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have aught against any." We must hope eagerly for a chance to forgive, not only the individual enemy but also the national enemy, or else prayer will become obsolete.

Men who would pray well must look out with friendly sympathy on all of life, upon

those oppressed by unfortunate industrial conditions, or living in parts of the world where the name of the Friendly Christ has not yet been heard. Perhaps one reason why the church has never been able to realize at all adequately in experience the possibilities that Jesus saw in prayer, is the fact that it has not yet thoroughly done this. We can individually look thoughtfully over our circle of acquaintances in order to realize the various forms of need existing among them, so that there may spring up within us the strong friendly sympathy essential to successful prayer.

It is essential also that we begin at once to *act* in the expression of friendly feeling. If there is nothing given out at the outlet, there will be no sense of anything coming in at the intake. If nothing is passing out from us in the friendly meeting of human need all about us, there will be no sense of anything coming in to us from the Friendly God. We can not too often repeat Sam Foss' interpretation of the old Homeric line:

“Let me live in a house by the side of the road
Where the race of men go by;

The men that are good and the men that
are bad,
As good and as bad as I.
I would not sit in the scorner's seat,
Nor hurl the cynic's ban;
Let me live in a house by the side of the
road
And be a friend to man."

Men who would pray well must keep an open "house by the side of the road" where travelers, by day or in midnight darkness, may easily turn in and find "a friend to man." When men discover that the house is no cheap, gossipy tavern, but that it has wireless connections with the unseen world, it will be to them a "house of God."

As was said in the beginning the present great world pain, which we hope may be followed by the birth of a new age, summons all Christians to a better understanding and use of our Lord's great resource, Christian prayer. The Christian men and women of all nations by rising in prayer for others above racial hate, bitter sense of injury, humiliating greed of gain, may yet make what seems to be a world catastrophe

the occasion of a forward movement in the growing Kingdom of God. They may test in the experience the truthfulness of the propositions we have been considering:

There is all about us a friendly, vital energy called the Living God, steadily working upon human life to make friendship, brotherhood, universal and secure throughout the human race.

Prayer is a process by which a friendly man gets something from the Friendly God for the common good or to share with a fellow man in need. This process binds men together in fast friendship, brings them together into conscious friendship with the Living God, and so contributes vitally to making friendship universal and secure throughout the human race.

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